BOOK REVIEW


This book originated in a symposium on business ethics at the University of Canterbury, New Zealand, in 1997. Patricia Werhane gave the keynote address and her paper and many of the others in this collection originated at the conference. Subsequent contributions were obtained from other writers in New Zealand and Asia. Consequently, the book, unlike many in Business Ethics, arises from and is particularly (but not solely) relevant to discussions in this part of the world.

A strength of the book is that it takes a broad view of the ethics of business. There is, for example, a chapter (by M. Hirshberg) on the ethics of property and starvation. The author outlines an earlier ethic (“Christian paternalism”) which required those with power and wealth to have full regard for the “common people.” Property and wealth were to be shared. Since this was not conducive to the profit making ethics of early capitalism, Christianity was rethought under Protestantism and the view became current that economic success is the mark of God’s favour. Thus capitalist profit making and Christian ethics could be reconciled by a stress on charity rather than justice: charity, unlike justice, does not threaten the individual entrepreneur or the capitalist system.

In an early chapter, Earl discusses the economic and social revolution which took place in New Zealand in the 1980’s and 1990’s. This, he suggests, was based on the notion that workers must be made anxious and entrepreneurs secure. This will, it was thought, motivate the worker to work hard and the entrepreneur to invest. In a later chapter, Ian Grant relates this to the issue of trust vs mistrust and argues that unless businesses create an atmosphere of trust, they will not have a firm basis for an ethical code. A later chapter (by Nilakant and Addison) presents interesting empirical data on companies which are more or less trusting. They argue that a company with a “makeup agreement” gained better staff support than one in which a “human resource” expert encouraged an autocratic regime. In

the latter, “worker morale plummeted and there was a general feeling that
the workers’ trust had been violated.”

Glynn Owens examines a more down to earth issue: the use of ster-
oids in sport. His paper, in which philosophical scepticism is ably used,
argues that all the major arguments against drug taking in sport fall to
be convincing (beneficence, non-maleficence, autonomy and justice). He
argues instead for the issue to be examined not in the light of ethics but in
the light of aesthetics. This entails that taking a steroid is similar to that of a
forward pass in rugby or a two legged take off in the high jump. The breach
of the rule distorts the game. Despite its initial plausibility it seems to me
that this fails to distinguish between a penalty for an infringement which
is part of the game and a punishment for an offence which lies outside the
game. One could not, for example, regard the poisoning of an opponent as
a breach of an *aesthetic* code.

Several papers deal with the Asian Context: Business and Culture in the
Philippines, Japanese Philosophical Traditions and Business, Confucian
Ethics and the traditions of the People of Hong Kong. These are enlight-
ening to those of us whose ethic derives from a mixture of Western secular
ethics and versions (often poorly understood) of Christianity.

The final three papers look ahead. Godlovitch expresses the view that,
despite all the setbacks, we are making moral progress towards more
inclusive concepts of individual autonomy and collective sovereignty. The
evidence coming in from developing countries makes that contention very
debatable. More soberly, Alan Singer thinks that progress is unlikely
unless there is a new way of thinking, one which harnesses the power of
technology to genuine human concerns.

In his “afterword” Singer develops this idea in relation to the book as
a whole. He suggests that both Western and Confucian models of the firm
have assumed the individual into a “family” or “team” which is restrictive
of the autonomy of persons. There is need, he argues, for “a richer concep-
tual model of each and every person, as an autonomous carrier of rights, in
all their roles” pp. 241–242. To enable this rethinking of business ethics to
take place, we will have to examine our conceptual models of management.
We are lucky, he suggests, that in the modern world we are able to bring to
bear the insights of various cultures.

Without discounting completely these grounds for hope, this reviewer
can only reflect that far from our current business life becoming more multi-
cultural, it seems to be becoming more mono cultural: whatever
the surrounding cultural traditions, the culture of business seems to be
becoming that of the global entrepreneur, with no loyalties to country or